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Fire salvage must be quick

Congressman Greg Walden, the Republican representing central and eastern Oregon, has introduced what he calls the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act. The idea is to streamline federal procedures so that, after a huge wildfire, burned trees can be logged if that can be done without doing further damage to the environment.

The bill is under attack from environmental groups. The Unified Forest Defense Campaign calls it "this new environmental assault threatening the national forests."

The opposition is misguided. For instance, the Unified Campaign claims that Walden's bill, HR 4200, "sweeps aside environmental safeguards and requirements for public involvement of logging projects on federal forests following fires and other natural disturbances."

What it does instead is to require forest managers, after a disaster, to spend no more than 30 days deciding what if anything to do about it. After that, there would be a 90-day public comment and appeals period. And, Walden says, those who take part in that process then would have the right to litigate the final decision after it is made.

Walden says the bill would keep intact the whole body of environmental law. Unlike the salvage rider a few years ago, the proposal does not waive any laws, he insists.

He says the legislation is carefully framed to provide for a way to get economic value out of burned timber before months and years go by and any value disappears.

The environmental group says that fires are a natural part of forest ecosystems and that 150 bird species make their homes in burned forests. Well, since these species don't die out during the years when no disasters happen, presumably they can survive in green forests as well.

Since the attack on Walden's bill has to resort to laughable assertions like the one about the birds, we can assume that the bill itself is basically sound.

In a society that uses wood, it can't be wrong to try to get it from trees that are dead instead of from green ones, or from countries where environmental laws don't exist.

Not every fire has to be followed by logging the dead trees, but when this can be done without further harm, it has to be done quickly, and that is what the bill is meant to achieve. (hh)